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ABSTRACT

Classroom observation and evaluation of teachers by supervisors or principals is a delicate process. Most teachers would welcome feedback from their supervisors about improving teaching, but they rarely receive it. Many times the role of the principal is unclear in the observation process. Standardized observation formats sometimes fail to accommodate the skewed patterns of instructional delivery found among a particular group of teachers. Having evaluation personnel develop a school-specific format, based upon existing teaching styles, would be one alternative to using a standardized format. The feedback conference should begin on a positive note. As the supervisor goes through the observation process, the establishment of supervisor-teacher rapport is the most important element. The probability of a successful observation process where mutual communication occurs between teacher and administrator improves dramatically when the criteria for observation are mutually agreed upon, and when the supervisor proceeds with sensitivity and skill. (RS)

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A Communicative Approach to Observation and Feedback

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Classroom observation and evaluation of teachers by supervisors or principals is a delicate process. This Digest focuses on the cultivation of a communication approach to that process.

Feedback

Most teachers would welcome feedback from their supervisors about improving teaching, but they rarely receive it (Ingham, 1990). Instead, supervisor feedback many times takes the form of one-dimensional rating scales, or is seen as a tool in the hire-fire process (Dunkleberger, 1982).

Some teachers seem to like to be helped, and they expect to be told what to do as well. For them, evaluations containing prescriptions of what to do are welcome. Beginning teachers, for example, seem to prefer models and direction to collaboration. However, many other practice teachers and inservice teachers have a keen interest in seeing how others teach. Observing others in order to get a different perspective on teaching is not the same as being told what to do by others. Observing to explore is a process; observing to help or evaluate is a product.

Observation Process

Many times the role of the principal is unclear in this observation process. Some states have attempted to legislate the observation and evaluation process, setting minimum criteria that teachers must meet (Sullivan and Wircenski, 1988). In many communities the school board will have an approved observation instrument, which may or may not be satisfactory for principal and teacher.

A number of standardized observation formats are available to principals—those of Ned Flanders, Pamela Noli, and R.T. Hyman are popular and are recommended by many supervisors. Each contains valuable clues as to which variables contribute most to effective instruction. In effect, they represent an ideal of instructional style based on a specific theory of teaching.

When principals have the freedom to choose how they wish to evaluate teachers, they may need to design their own instruments (Lockledge, 1984). The development process might involve reviewing the literature, examining existing assessment instruments, developing a rough draft, and then asking teachers to review the instrument to provide input regarding the criteria.

The standardized observation formats sometimes fail to accommodate the skewed patterns of instructional delivery found among a particular group of teachers. Having evaluation personnel develop a school-specific format, based upon existing teaching styles, would be one alternative to using a standardized format (Cuccia, 1988). This process avoids the common assumptions about "correct" teaching methods and offers three advantages to both evaluators and teachers: (1) the format is consistent with the teaching styles practiced in the school, so its use is compatible with the teaching practices observed; (2) through the use of a lesson observation form, specific baseline data can be systematically collected for the purpose of improving instruction; and (3) lesson observation feedback can be clearly and precisely communicated to teachers based on observable instructional variables.

School-specific lesson observations are usually a positive experience for both teachers and evaluators. This is especially true if they include peer evaluation, flexible criteria, and professional development or recognition as components in the process.

One such research-based strategy of clinical observation, developed specifically for elementary and middle school use, involves the entire school staff in designing teacher observations to fit the needs of the particular school and its personnel. The supervisory process includes the steps of: setting objectives; observing and recording data; analyzing data; providing feedback; taking corrective action; and offering constructive criticism (Lockledge, 1984).

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Another model for teacher evaluation is the anthropological field method (Streich, 1984). This is different from either the checklist or rating sheet method, which evaluates teachers against a uniform set of criteria, or the clinical-supervision method, which focuses on the supervisor-teacher relationship. The anthropological field method encompasses both of the more widely used methods already mentioned, and also provides insight into highly complex educational phenomena. The method proceeds in three successive stages: (1) the supervisor unobtrusively observes characteristics of the classroom setting, and of the behaviors of teacher and students; (2) the supervisor formulates, then verifies through further observation, propositions regarding classroom behavior patterns; and (3) the supervisor holds a conference with the teacher to discuss the latter's performance and design an inservice training course based on the aforementioned propositions.

Teacher Administrator Communication

The feedback conference should begin on a positive note with a discussion of the effective practices used by the teacher as observed by the principal. Throughout the conference, the principal should keep the focus on the data collected during the observation. In fact, it is critical that the feedback be on recorded data, and not strictly on the principal's memory. Miles (1989) and Brinko (1990), who both see feedback as an important communication strategy in the school culture, emphasize that feedback should deal in concrete, accurate description and specifics and be focused towards a few definite goals.

For example, assume that one of the agreed-upon areas for observation was "questioning." The data might show the number of questions asked, the level of questions, the amount of time given a student to respond, the number of student questions, and similar observations. The teacher and the principal can then analyze together what actually occurred during the classroom observation period. If a teacher is experiencing difficulty, the principal may wish to focus on two or three behaviors rather than asking the teacher to change a number of behaviors. Just as holds true for students, improvement and a feeling of success will be more likely to occur if the teacher does not feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task.

As the supervisor goes through the observation process, the establishment of supervisor-teacher rapport is the most important element. The observation process, often criticized and abandoned by supervisors because it is time consuming, is one of building relationships between the individual supervisor and the individual teacher. Humanness, self-respect, relaxation, communication, contracts, agreements, collaboration, helpfulness, and therapeutics are all components of the supervisor-teacher relationship. A skilled supervisor, no matter which observational method he or she chooses, should be able both to achieve organizational goals and objectives, and to meet the individual needs of teachers.

Clinical observation and evaluation afford both the teacher and the principal an opportunity to engage in discussions regarding the improvement of instruction. The supervisory model to aim for is one that is interactive rather than supervisor-centered.

Educational supervisors have placed a high priority on classroom observation as a means of appraising or evaluating teachers and of improving instruction. But the observation experience needs to be a positive one for both teachers and principals, and the responsibility for this lies mostly with the principal. The probability of a successful observation process where mutual communication occurs between teacher and administrator improves dramatically when the criteria for observation are mutually agreed upon, and when the supervisor proceeds with sensitivity and skill.

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